

## **Project Leadership inspires law degree**

Mark Strecker graduated from Family Voices of California's Project Leadership family advocacy training program in 2016, and in early December he graduated from Thomas Jefferson School of Law. When he officially becomes a licensed attorney, he looks forward to assisting families like his who are struggling with access to disability resources.

*"I paid a high price in time, health, and money to learn how to advocate for my children, and the price was too high to not share [what I learned]."*

Mark's journey to law school began with a fight for access to services for his two children, Rohan and Violet. Rohan was diagnosed with Autism in 2011, shortly before Senate Bill 946 was signed into law, requiring health plans to cover Autism services as a medical benefit. To cover Autism services for Rohan, their health plan conducted their own evaluation. They concluded that Rohan was typically developing, contradicting the conclusions from 5 previous evaluations.

*"I discovered quickly that if you were going to fall through the cracks with these agencies, you would."*

When Violet began showing signs of Autism and received a similar inaccurate evaluation, Mark sought the help of state disability advocates who helped him file independent medical reviews of both children's evaluations. Both reviews confirmed what Mark and his wife already knew: Rohan and Violet had Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Until the family reached out to local disability advocates, Mark and Emily felt like they were in the fight alone. He was resistant to the idea of community support at first, but eventually came around.

*"I joined a local support group and it just started to heal me."*

Sharing his experiences with others, especially parents who were just starting their special needs journey, was especially rewarding for him. It was in that support group that Mark heard about Project Leadership.

Project Leadership is a comprehensive advocacy and leadership training program designed to increase the number of family members of children with special health care needs prepared and supported to become advocates for health care policy and service improvements. FVCA has trained 130 facilitators from 70 local organizations serving families of children with special needs in nearly 45 California

counties and 3 additional states. Local organizations have graduated more than 500 family members from the 7-session training program, which provides information, skills, and tools to help families move from individual to systems level advocacy.

Mark joined a cohort of Project Leadership graduates at the Early Start Family Resource Center (Inland Regional Center) in San Bernardino, and instantly fell into community. Mark's Project Leadership experience and his fellow trainees' encouragement inspired him to supercharge his advocacy efforts by seeking a law degree. He was accepted to Thomas Jefferson School of Law with a scholarship. There, he encouraged many fellow students to consider special education and disability rights advocacy specialties, and ended up as the de facto resource for anyone facing their own disability or special education issues.

Mark began an internship at Disability Right California as a law clerk, researching and writing briefs on discrimination cases related to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). He often referred to Project Leadership lessons to help clients understand and navigate systems, and resolve concerns.

*"Our rights are incredibly powerful in this state, but nobody knows them."*

*Learn more about Independent Medical Reviews and filing grievances with your health plan at the California Department of Managed Care Health Center [www.dmhc.ca.gov](http://www.dmhc.ca.gov). Learn more about Project Leadership at [www.familyvoices.org](http://www.familyvoices.org)*